

COVID-19 testing update (5.21.20)

Dear DOC colleagues,

I write to tell you about plans underway for widespread COVID-19 testing across all DOC facilities **for both staff and the individuals who are incarcerated**. Comprehensive facility staff testing is a priority we are working to realize in the near future. In the coming days, we will begin implementing systematic testing of all who are incarcerated. We hope to extend testing to all DOC staff as well.

This news will raise questions for you. I ask for your patience as we complete the planning process for staff testing and work out the details of how it will be implemented. I wanted to talk to you now about **why** we are expanding testing, even before we know all the details, because you will soon see testing moving forward for those who are incarcerated. Testing is such an important part of our ability to combat this pandemic, we think it makes sense to move forward where we can, when we can. Please read on for a bit more detail.

At the DOC, our testing of those who are incarcerated has expanded from where we began a couple of months ago. But up to this point, limitations on the state's testing capacity has meant we couldn't provide testing to staff. Thankfully, that capacity has now increased to the point where staff testing is not only feasible, but prudent.

Our goal during this pandemic is to protect the health and lives of all of you, your families, and the people who are incarcerated or under supervision. With credit going to all of you, our strategy thus far – with the Stay-with-Unit plans, handwashing stations, isolation and quarantine procedures, and employee screening as the central components – has yielded positive results overall.

But, as you may know, some studies have shown that as many as 50 percent of people with COVID-19 could be asymptomatic – they may be wholly unaware they are positive and infectious to others, including to their family members. While most who contract COVID-19 experience mild to moderate symptoms, some become very ill suffering life-threatening complications.

For these reasons, we believe regular, widespread testing must be central to our strategy of combating COVID-19 within the DOC. Testing is no silver bullet. But the longer infection goes undetected, the more risk there is of others getting infected. The longer infection goes undetected, the more risk there is of some getting seriously ill and overwhelming our local clinics and hospitals. Now, as our state slowly begins to reopen, it is critical we detect pockets of infection to keep the virus from spreading.

Like I said, we do not yet have all the answers. If you do have questions or concerns, please raise them through the Incident Management Team -- IMT.DOC@state.mn.us. Those questions will help guide us through the final planning stages.

As we head into this Memorial Day weekend, please continue to take care of yourselves. I wish only the best of health for you and your families. Each day I remind myself the best way to keep my family and my coworkers safe, is to closely follow the simple strategies of frequent hand washing, maintaining social distancing, and wearing a mask at work and in public.

Please don't hesitate to call me if you have questions or concerns.

Paul Schnell
Commissioner